

**STELLA AURORAE: THE HISTORY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY, VOLUME 3: THE UNIVERSITY OF NATAL (1976–2003)**

by BILL GUEST

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PUBLICATION of the third volume of Bill Guest's mammoth history of the University of Natal (as it was known during the years covered in this volume, 1976–2003) marks the completion of what currently stands as the most comprehensive history of a South African university. The three volumes comprise almost 1 300 pages of text (including endnotes). This volume, like the previous two, is founded upon a massive research effort. The amount of detail amassed and incorporated into a coherently structured account is remarkable. All the university's faculties and departments are given coverage and due recognition. Such has been the thoroughness of Guest's excavation and exploration, it must surely be the case that all of the significant publications and research outputs of academics based at the university's three campuses during this period are mentioned and recognised. He takes the account up to the year 2003, choosing not to venture into the somewhat fraught period in the university's history following the merger with the University of Durban-Westville in 2004 to form the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Those with an interest in this more recent, thorny history should read the book by Nithaya Chetty and Christopher Merrett, *The Struggle for the Soul of a South African University*.

It would be a truism to say that South African universities today are very different institutions from what they were

in the mid-1970s. All the changing trends were well underway by 2003, and are duly identified by Guest in this volume. First, there was the growing size and changing racial composition of the student population. In 1976, a total of 7 952 students were enrolled at the university's three campuses; by 2003 the number had grown almost fourfold to 31 794. In 1979 there were 1 152 black students at the university, the vast majority of whom (714) were at the medical school, which admitted only black students. By 2003, 80% of students were black (in the wider sense of the term).

A second trend has been the growing financial strain experienced by South African universities. In 1990 the University of Natal obtained 66% of its income from the state subsidy and 25% from student fees (the rest from other sources, such as donor funding). By 2003 the subsidy component had fallen to 56% of total income, with the fee component rising to over 32%. The proportion of income from the state subsidy has continued to fall since 2003, with a proportionate increase in fee income. It was this trend that goes some way towards explaining the #FeesMustFall movement of 2015–2016.

A third trend, related to the second, has been the growing corporatisation of universities. When the ANC-led government assumed power in 1994 it placed demands on the higher education sector – that it increase its student

enrolments and gear its operations more towards the economic needs of the country. Given the decline in the proportion of income derived from the state subsidy, this meant that universities had to do more with less. This in turn has required them to be more business-like in their functioning; resulting in both a more managerial style of leadership and in rising demands placed on the academic sector. Guest shows well how this played out at the University of Natal, with costly 'uneconomic' departments suffering staffing and budgetary cuts. At the same time deans were expected to operate as line managers, now appointed to their positions rather than being elected by faculty members and thus more accountable to the university executive.

A fourth development has been a significant growth in research. In 1979 the University of Natal's annual grant to its own research fund amounted to a mere R30 000, the same as it had been in 1974. Over the next two decades the university's research funding, and its overall research output, grew dramatically. By 1999 the university ranked third in the country, behind UCT and Wits, in terms of research output per staff member.

Guest covers all these trends in this volume, as well as many other themes – administration, infrastructural development, teaching and student life among them. He also tackles some of the more difficult phases and episodes in this history. There was the political activ-

ism, protest and accompanying state repression from the late 1970s. When Steve Biko, a former medical student, was murdered in 1977 the university council refused to make a statement on the grounds that Biko had failed to graduate. On the Durban campus there was the 1986 arson attack which completely destroyed the Department of Political Studies (and would have done the same to my office had the fire continued for another ten minutes).

The book ends with a full account of two complex processes. First, the restructuring of the higher education sector that was initiated and overseen by Minister of Education Kader Asmal – a process that had a significant effect on the University of Natal, bringing about its merger with the University of Durban-Westville. And second, the fraught selection process that brought Malegapuru Makgoba to the position of vice-chancellor.

As calls for the transformation of the university sector have been sounded, so there has been a need for a clearer understanding of the history of South African universities. In recent years a number of books, articles and theses have been written in an effort to meet this need. Bill Guest's trilogy stands out as the most thorough and detailed of these contributions. It will also be of special interest to anybody who worked or studied at the university during this 27-year period.

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